

Sowing Mustard Seeds
1 Samuel 15, Mark 4:26-34
Rev. Cameron Barr
June 13, 2021

I

It's funny to read the Bible sometimes and notice how we have an inflated sense of self-importance - especially when it comes to finding leaders in community. When the Apostles find themselves one short of a perfect dozen after the loss of Judas, they don't appoint a nominating committee and conduct an exhaustive search. They just draw lots. So - who's it going to be? The lot falls on Matthias. Sometimes the simplest solution is best. Maybe our boards and committees that still need to select a new chair after the Annual Meeting should keep that in mind. I'll cut some straws and leave them in the office for you.

Or, consider the Old Testament, when Israel needs a replacement for its first king, Saul. The chair of the search committee, the revered priest Samuel, sets it up like a beauty pageant. All the sons of Jesse parade before his scrutinizing gaze. Eliab. Look not just at "outward appearances," Samuel counsels, "the Lord looks upon the heart." Abinidab. Shammah. "Neither has the Lord chosen this one." It's not clear that Samuel knows exactly what he's looking for. Unsatisfied with any of these options, he inquires if Jesse has truthfully presented all his sons. Turns out the youngest, the shepherd David, has been left in the field. Despite all this talk of looking for the inner qualities, the only details Samuel mentions are about how the young man looks. "Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him, for this is the one.'"

Maybe we're drawing straws. Or maybe, despite our pretenses, we're really just running a beauty contest. The biblical approach to leadership says that maybe we shouldn't take ourselves so seriously. What we tell ourselves we're looking for isn't always what we really see. Even when we think we're in control, the Spirit is actually working through us. Isaiah is overwhelmed by the vision of seraphs. The coal touches his lips, like a lot falling on his head. "Here I am Lord, send me." You have to read that sentence with a question mark at the end. Me? Me? Me of all people? The lot could fall just as well on any other prophet in Israel. Or think of Moses, overwhelmed beside the burning bush - resistant, anxious, and full of doubt. Surely there must be someone else. But the bush was burning for no one else. Only Moses.

II

I do think it helps to reflect on our life in community with reference to these Biblical stories. They help us to relate to the work before us with good humor and humility. At the Annual Meeting on Tuesday I talked about the church wide nominating process that we have used to welcome and bless new leaders among us. Far more intentional than drawing lots. Far less shallow than a beauty pageant. No less holy than the ground beside the burning bush.

Because we are a church with many differences in identity and lived experience, and many communities in and around us, it's especially important that we find ways to empower everyone's voice. Our ministry together is strongest when it includes everyone here. And we build trust when we are transparent about how we make decisions with equity for everyone in mind. I think of this as a new skill that we are all learning together. If you think of the church as the Body of Christ, then sometimes the body has to learn a new skill - how to walk, how to play piano. Inclusive Excellence is a skill that we are learning together. Our open and transparent nominating process is such a good example of putting this new skill into practice. It was risky for us to proceed with an open call for the Nominating Committee. We didn't know if it would work. In fact, we didn't get

it right the first time, when we needed to return to the congregation to identify a moderator. But our bravery and persistence has paid off in a wonderful slate of new leaders who bring many wonderful differences to the table and who are energetic to serve in the coming months.

III

Jesus says that God works through faith the size of a mustard seed. It is the smallest of seeds that grows into the greatest of shrubs. Who would have thought? Who would have thought they found the twelfth apostle by drawing straws? Who would have thought the scrawniest of Jesse's shepherds would become God's anointed king? That's how it starts, at least. Casting lots. A search of the sheep herding fields. A nominating committee? How do we know we're doing it right? Do you think any of these characters in scripture really knew what they were doing, or were they just finding their way? We can only live by faith, then, that the seeds we are planting with one another today will grow by God's providence in grace, and in God's time. I guess that's how I think about these principles and values we discussed at the annual meeting. Things like transparency for building trust, equity for all the communities of the church, inclusion for everyone in our processes and systems. This is faith the size of a mustard seed. Let us pray that it will grow.